

"FAREWELL WORDS TO MONTREAL."

A SERMON

BY

REV. J. B. BONAR.

Preached at the close of his Pastorate over the

AMERICAN

PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH,

ON SUNDAY EVENING, JANUARY 31st, 1869.

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PUBLISHED BY REQUEST.
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MONTREAL:

J. M. HILLSTON, PUBLISHER & BOOKSELLER, GREAT ST. BARNABAS ST.

1869.

FAREWELL WORDS.

ACTS, XX. 32.

"And now, brethren, I commend you to God, and to the Word of his grace, which is able to build you up, and to give you an inheritance among all them which are sanctified."

These were the words of Paul at his last meeting with the Elders of the Church in Ephesus. They are selected to-night, not as the basis of a discourse, but as expressing my feelings on bidding you a kindly official farewell. For eleven years and eight months—more than two years longer than any of my predecessors—I have labored among you as a preacher and pastor: you will allow me to say, with more than average success, and also with more than the usual hindrances, difficulties and trials. To-night the scenes through which I have here passed are vividly before me. I think of the 210 children I have baptized, the 120 couples I have united in marriage, and the 210 persons I have buried. I recall the sermons preached, the countless visits made to the sick and the sorrowful, the inquiries and confessions made by the more than 500 persons who have come to me for guidance in their spiritual difficulties, scenes of joy and scenes of sorrow, times of success and triumph, and times of defeat and disappointment—all come up to-night to find their best expression in these words:—"I commend you to God and to the Word of His grace, which is able to build you up, and to give you an inheritance among all them which are sanctified."

Twelve years ago, the American Church held a humble place among the churches of this city, so far as numbers were concerned. The last census of the

city proves that in 1861 its members and adherents were not so numerous as those belonging to the Unitarian or the Baptist, and not half the number of those attending the Congregational Church. American Presbyterian, 422 ; Unitarian, 468 ; Baptist 624, Congregational 969. In June 1857, this congregation consisted of 107 householders : last September when I presented my resignation, it consisted of 146 householders. In April, 1857 its reported membership was 216 ; our report to Presbytery last April, showed 346. Sabbath School membership, then under 400, now reported at 842. In 1857 its property was worth less than \$20,000, to-day, excluding our mission chapels, it is worth over \$60,000—or, \$45,000 clear of all incumbrance. In all these respects, therefore, I leave you in a much better position than I found you.

The pastor of a National Church, like this, occupies a comparatively isolated position : his efforts and influence are necessarily more circumscribed than those of other pastors, whose ecclesiastical connections are all in the country in which they reside. This fact met me immediately on becoming your pastor. During my residence here, I have had a clear and definite object ever before me—an object to which all my time and energies have been devoted—viz. : to lead men to God through the Lord Jesus Christ. Standing apart from all pursuits, societies, associations, which had no reference to this object, I have given myself wholly to the work of the ministry. Deeply interested in the Sunday School Union, the Bible and French Canadian Missionary Societies, and the Young Men's Christian Association, I have still more deeply felt for the neglected Protestant poor in the city. I, therefore, urged the formation of the Montreal City Mission, which failed only through the want of co-operation on the part of some of the churches. Then, with the aid of one or two of my Elders, I enlisted this church, which established

the Chaboillez Square Mission, which is now doing more for the temporal and spiritual welfare of the city than many of the churches. But, while thus laboring, so far as my isolated position would allow, for the spread of the gospel generally in the community, my chief aim has ever been to lead the members of this congregation to the Saviour, to enlist them in works of christian usefulness, to incite them to form Christ-like characters that should honor the gospel, and fit them for the services and joys of a purer and a better world. One of the results has been that, while the annual average additions to this church during the pastorates of my two immediate predecessors was 16, the average additions during my ministry, with all its changes and hindrances, has been 23 for each year; while the increasing usefulness of its members, and the steady visible improvement in the characters of many, have been to me an unspeakable gratification and joy. These facts are mentioned not with a feeling of pride or boasting. The review of my ministry reveals many imperfections and shortcomings. Yet, in all humility, I bless God to-night, for the good I have here been permitted to witness. To Him, and to Him alone, belongs the glory.

There are certain great principles which have governed my conduct and lain at the basis of my preaching. These I wish to emphasize to-night as my last words.

1. The first is the total depravity and lost condition of all men by nature; not that men are destitute of good traits, or as bad as they can be; but that sin has corrupted his entire nature, and estranged the whole man from God. This is the doctrine which is written as with a sunbeam on every page of Scripture, and forms the foundation for the whole scheme of redemption. My own experience and observation lead me irresistibly to the same conclusion. I have now resided in three quarters of the world; I

have sojourned among fifteen or sixteen different nationalities of men,—long enough to understand their characters, and comprehend the principles underlying their conduct. In each and all of these, I have seen much that is estimable and lovely, many things to admire and praise, and nowhere more than in the City of Montreal. I have come in contact with the great and the lowly, the learned and the ignorant; in all there is much of human kindness and sympathy, often with high principle, manly self-respect, and a high sense of personal honor. I have seen all this among the Mohammedans and Jews, among adherents of the Greek and Roman Churches, and among those who were avowedly destitute of any religion. Montreal, for its population, probably contains as many of these bright examples as any other community on the face of the earth. But, with all this, I have everywhere also seen that God and God's will, are in men's minds subordinate to selfish inclinations and worldly interests. They may have a certain traditional reverence for God; they may engage with more or less devotion in religious rites; they may even give of their property for religious objects, and conform in many respects to the teachings of their religion; but, excepting only those who have been born again, men have no permanent, governing feeling of God's presence—no love to him, such as they have for parents or earthly friends—no such reverence for his authority as leads them habitually to sacrifice their personal inclinations, their prejudices and worldly interests, in order to obey his precepts and promote his glory. As an actual, undeniable fact, aside from all theories or doctrines, men are governed, not by disinterested love to God and man, but by *selfishness*. They may be, as they everywhere often are, kind and honorable toward each other, but they are all truants or rebels. This shows itself everywhere in the neglect of admitted duties, and in disobedience to the plainest and best known precepts. As already intimated, I have no-

where met more people whom I could love—more lovely or better people than in this city. But here also, I have met as much hypocrisy and ingratitude, deceit and falsehood, as much pride of ignorance, and insolence of wealth, as much selfishness in its varied manifestations, as much want of principle and want of respect for God, as I have ever seen anywhere else, among either Jews or Mohammedans. Some of those who have voluntarily come to me for instruction, and guidance under the convictions of conscience, have of their own accord made confessions that have utterly astounded me. There have been times during my ministry, when persons have expressed surprise at the frequency and urgency with which I set forth the enormity, and dissuaded from various forms of sin. They little knew, and through me they never will know, the terrible temptations with which some in this congregation, aye in the very families of those expressing the most surprise, were known to me to be then struggling. Let me tell you, you need to encourage your pastors to be faithful and to speak plainly and frequently with reference even to the worst forms of vice. Persons in this city of good position and good reputation have voluntarily confessed to me, that they had actually broken every commandment of the Decalogue, except the sixth commandment, and they had been saved from that, only by the fear of the hangman! The human heart is corrupt and depraved. Man must be born again, or he cannot find happiness in a world where all is perfect purity, and where universal love is the governing principle. Man, unrenewed, is without God and without any reasonable fitness for eternity. His morality cannot save him. Unless God interpose by his Spirit, man will continue in sin until he sinks into the dark caverns of eternal night. Such has been and such is my firm conviction. I have looked upon men as depraved and lost; I have labored among you under this impression.

2. Another great principle underlying my course

among you, has been the conviction that the salvation of all men is desirable and possible. Men are very sinful and guilty ; but God loves them nevertheless. His love springs from the fullness of his own nature, and is wholly independent of man's merit or demerit. This love is not limited by any class or national lines. It embraces the entire world for which He gave His Son. In God there is nothing like reluctance—no hindrance or obstacle of any kind to the salvation of any person, however degraded and guilty. Moreover, the Lord Jesus Christ, the God-Man, urgently invites, is abundantly able and willing to save every man ; it is his high office, his special mission, his peculiar glory to do so. The terms on which he offers salvation are simple, the easiest possible and alike to all,—repentance for past misdeeds, trust in him as Omnipotent to save, a life consecrated to his service, governed by his precepts, and animated by his Spirit. On these terms, I believe the salvation of every human being to be possible. On this principle, I have industriously sought to instruct you in the nature and consequences of sin ; I have contrasted your obligations with your conduct ; I have dwelt upon the unspeakable love of God, and especially upon the person and mission, the sufficiency and promises of the Lord Jesus Christ ; upon the fullness and freeness of the great salvation, and upon the guilt of those who neglected its merciful provisions. Eschewing all attempts at displays of learning or eloquence, I have sought to preach the Gospel, using every argument within my reach to induce you to comply with its terms and accept its blessings. In public and private I have addressed you as rational and intelligent beings, who could think and feel the force of truth, who might be saved but were in imminent danger of perdition. I have expected that God would bless his own truth, and through it lead you to a present experience of salvation. Nor have I been altogether disappointed. Many for whom I have labored and prayed, some

who have come to me as inquirers are still unsaved ; but many others have felt the power of God's truth, and obviously yielded to his claims ; some have shown it in peaceful or triumphant death-beds ; others are daily exhibiting it in their lives ; a large proportion of the active, growing and most esteemed part of the present membership of this church have been brought into it under my ministry. My experience here, as elsewhere, has convinced me that the salvation of no one is to be regarded as hopeless, and that the plain forcible presentation of Gospel truth, is God's chosen instrumentality for saving men and fitting them for heaven. If any person is here to-night, impenitent, unsaved, without hope, the reason is not in God but in themselves.

3. A third conviction, equally clear and deep, which has largely influenced my public and private teaching, is that faith without works is dead and utterly worthless. Hence I have preached the moral law as the christian's rule of life, and insisted upon the culture and manifestation of a Christ-like character and disposition, as the only reliable evidence of regeneration and discipleship. Religion is neither a dogma, a form, nor a feeling, but a life,—a life devoted to God's glory and governed by his precepts. The Bible requires that believers should manifest their faith by a separation from the world, and a consecration to those objects for which our Lord came from heaven to earth. The fruit of faith is holiness, whereof the end is immortal life. As a fact, Christ's true disciples have always been separate from the world. Regeneration makes a tremendous difference—changing the motives, directing the current of the thoughts, breaking the power of selfishness, giving tenderness to the heart and the conscience, leading to such views of God's glory and such an impression of Christ's love, that thenceforth man's highest aim is to please not himself, but the Lord that redeemed him. It is by the holiness and

love of Christians that God is to be honored, the Gospel commended, and men won to the Cross. It was for this that Christ came—"to save his people from their sins." This salvation from sin is begun at regeneration, and continued in the sanctification of those that believe from the heart. It is this completed salvation from sin which constitutes meekness for the heavenly inheritance, without which "no one shall see the Lord." The religion of Jesus Christ is not a series of transitory emotions, nor a system of empty speculations, with no practical, governing influence upon the heart and life. It is not the offspring of a wild enthusiasm that exhausts its force in feeling and leaves none for action. Experience without practise is nothing; and practise without experience is no more. Gospel religion consists in the actual existence within the heart of the various Christian graces, and in their due effect upon the life and character. If they do not manifest themselves—if they do not increasingly govern the whole man in his private personal habits, in his home, his business, his general intercourse with men,—then the salt has lost its savor and the Gospel its healing power; so far as that man is concerned, Christ's mission is unsuccessful, for he has not been saved from sin.

Having this conviction, I have frequently dwelt upon the privilege and duty of growing in grace. Knowing something of the deceitfulness of the human heart, knowing how averse men are to self-denial, and how ready to rest in mere forms and professions, I have, throughout my ministry, steadily held up *character* as the grand end, aim, design, and result of the Gospel. I have dwelt upon the Christian graces, and urged you to their diligent cultivation. My constant study has been to preach close, searching, practical sermons, that should lead you to think and prompt you to self-improvement. I have aimed to hold up the Gospel mirror, and to turn it upon

every hearer, so that each might see his own deformities in contrast with Christ's unspeakable loveliness, that thus you might be induced to loathe the one and strive after the other. I have had to study two books—God's Word, and your characters, circumstances, tendencies,—and to apply the one for the correction of the other. This is the work of the pastor as distinguished from that of the evangelist. I have not wasted my energies or your time with tirades against the sins of the antediluvians, denunciations of witchcraft or polygamy—sins which here have no existence. Instead of occupying your devotional hours with expositions of such musty wickedness, I have labored to instruct you in the great principles of family religion, in christian integrity and the gospel rules of commercial morality, and to put you on your guard against pursuits and practices that were inimical to the spiritual life or of a doubtful tendency. I have no sympathy with the feeling that a pastor must not publicly and plainly allude to the sins or doubtful practises of the members or prominent pecuniary supporters of the church to which he ministers. I would not for an hour occupy any pulpit with a gag in my mouth. I do not regard the ordinance of preaching as possessed of any mystical, sacramental power to benefit men. It is only as your minds and hearts are occupied with the Scriptural truth suited to your wants that you can be profited. The preacher can do you no good except as he present such truth suited to your capacities, and as you exercise your minds and hearts upon it. I have laboured to present truth in an attractive form; but I have been more anxious to apply it to the lives and characters of those who waited on my ministry.

Living among you, associating daily, familiarly with you, and looking at everything as it bore upon your eternal destiny, I have seen many things which endangered your salvation and lessened your christian influence, I could not avoid seeing that the

pride of wealth and the haste to be rich, were, canker like, eating into the spiritual life of some, and hindering the salvation of many. I have told you so, and presented truths fitted to promote humility and to moderate worldly ambition. I have seen, as every one else does, that the conformity of christians to the world, with its pride and ostentation, its misuse of means and heartless displays of selfishness, was sapping the foundations of piety and virtue, rendering the ordinances of religion and the labours of pastors comparatively fruitless, ruining the children and youth, dishonoring and hindering the Gospel. I have been deeply pained at the changes which in this respect I have witnessed, not in all, but in influential quarters. The patriarchal simplicity, with its free, healthy and invigorating influences, which formerly characterized the social and domestic life of christians in this city is rapidly disappearing. There is creeping in, a lavish expenditure, an ostentatious display of wealth, with luxurious habits and forms of social enjoyment, which threaten the most disastrous results, not only to the Churches, but to the community. In professed votaries of the world, these are simply ridiculous. But, when professing christians, who have renounced the pomps and vanities of the world, outvie worldlings in their worldly ways, it is a much more serious matter. By such a course, they not only give the lie to their professions, renounce their heavenly citizenship and become naturalized Sodomites, but they train up their children for perdition, discourage the hearts and tie the hands of christian laborers, and exert a chilling and most pernicious influence upon all within their reach. I have seen and felt all this, as only a pastor can. As God's servant, soon to stand at the judgment seat, I could not remain silent. I have insisted upon the right use and responsibilities of wealth, upon heavenly-mindedness and non-conformity to the world. I have warned you against having fellowship with the works of darkness, or pitching your

tent toward Sodom. I have forewarned you as to the inevitable consequences to your own families and the influence upon the ungodly. I have known that forms of recreation and amusement, contrary to the Gospel and to the spiritual well-being of men, were extensively patronized and extending in this community. I have publicly and privately dissuaded from these, denouncing dancing parties and card playing in christian families, warning against the theatre and billiard saloon as the vestibules of hell. I have not spoken hastily or ignorantly I tell you solemnly to-night that in every instance with which I am acquainted, worldly conformity in these things has obliterated all devotional feeling, destroyed all christian usefulness, and been most pernicious in its influence upon every character. Moses tells us that an angel from heaven could not persuade the children of Lot to flee from Sodom; and I tell you that no pastoral effort or influence can effectually reach the sons or daughters of those who every now and then turn their parlors into ball-rooms, and their upper chambers into places for the training of gamblers. I speak from painful pastoral experience; for my high hopes with reference to more than one young person have been destroyed through these things. I know, as every pastor in this city does, that the conformity of professed christians to the world is the greatest hindrance to the Gospel—second only to the depravity of the heart from which it springs. I have known that here as elsewhere intemperance was one of the greatest evils of the age. I have watched one and another as they entered upon the drunkard's career, and pursued it in spite of entreaties, until I consigned them to hopeless graves. I have seen that the drinking customs of society, the use of cider and domestic wines, lay at the foundation of intemperance. I have, therefore, annually spoken to you of this monster sin: I have solemnly warned you of the guilt involved in the liquor traffic, as well

as of the danger and the fatal influence attending the most moderate use of anything bearing the appearance of liquor.

In this way, I have sought faithfully and kindly to bring the Gospel to bear upon your hearts and consciences, your homes, your lives, your eternal hopes. I have had very decided convictions of right and wrong. I have expressed these so plainly that every man, woman and child in the congregation knows my opinions upon all those subjects of Gospel morality and christian expediency, which underlie their own lives and characters—upon all their pursuits and practises. These opinions are unchanged, they have only been confirmed and strengthened by my observations and experiences in this city. To-night, I solemnly endorse all the opinions expressed in the past upon these subjects. If any of you are here to-night in impenitence, or leading an unworthy christian life, it is not for the want of instruction, warning and invitation. I take you to record before God that my skirts are clear.

My ministry has not been altogether, nor even mainly occupied in battling against sin. The Bible has many refreshing streams and rich pastures into which I have ever loved to lead you. I am deeply convinced that, while professing Christians often fail in duty, they more generally live far below their privileges: I have, therefore, opened up to you those privileges, explained the limitless provisions of infinite grace, set before you—from Scripture and Christian biography—noteworthy examples, and incited you to those lofty heights of Christian faith and experience, where the light of Divine love ever warms the hearts of disciples, and where each dwells in full view of the Celestial City. Aiming by careful instruction to lay broad and deep the foundations of faith, I have loved to dwell upon the many great and precious promises of a faithful God and Saviour. The most delightful part of a pastor's work is in giv-

ing encouragement to the timid or desponding, in consoling the bereaved, and in comforting those who are sorely tempted and tried. The pastor never finds the gospel so precious to his own soul, as when thus witnessing its blessed power upon the hearts of others. That precious experience has often been mine during these eleven years and eight months. No people could have given their pastor more of their confidence than you have given to me. I have been consulted on the most delicate matters, often involving family affairs, not readily communicated to outsiders. Large numbers of children and youth of both sexes, when awakened to the solemn realities of life and eternity, have secretly come and opened their hearts to me, in preference to their own fathers and mothers. The aged have clung to my hand, and confided to my ear their hopes and fears as they entered the precincts of the dark valley. Those in youth and manhood have confessed their sins and shortcomings, made known their trials, and looked to me for guidance and comfort. To all I have been accessible, to all I have loved to minister of the consolations of the grace of God. In this I have often been greatly aided, so that there are many here who will never hereafter think of me except with tenderness. And when God next visits them with trial, sickness, bereavement, I know they will long to hear the voice that has so often comforted them in the past. I trust and pray, that God may send you a pastor, who shall deal as faithfully with your souls, and sympathise as tenderly in your sorrows as I have done—one to whom you shall be able to go with as much freedom and confidence as you have ever come to me.

These labors for you are all ended. A few minutes more and the last words of a sermon eleven years and eight months long will be uttered. I have very strong convictions as to the advantages of a permanent pastorate, especially to the church and

the community. But I have equally strong convictions that life is too short, and the interests at stake too large, for me to waste time in battling with unfounded and unworthy prejudices: for that which came in without reason cannot be driven out by reason. Hence, although my love to you has suffered no abatement: although more than two-thirds of you deliberately resolved not to accept my resignation and requested me to withdraw it; and although many more of you regret it, I have persisted in my determination. The world has to me many bright and sunny spots, to which memory often carries me. Of all these spots Montreal will hereafter be the brightest and also the darkest.

My last words to you are those of solemn admonition. There is very much among the Christians of this city that merits high commendation: there are other things which awaken solicitude. There has for many years been a delightful feeling of Christian union. This is right in itself, and indispensable in a Roman Catholic community. I regret to see indications of a growing denominational spirit—a disposition to stand alone—not on the part of the pastors, but among some of the would-be leaders of the people. I urge you to guard against this, and diligently to cultivate a spirit of union. The erection of large and costly church edifices, with greatly increased expenses, threatens another result, which cannot be too deeply deplored, viz.: the separation of the rich from the poor in the house of God. Each class needs the other for their spiritual well-being, no less than for their temporal prosperity. The church that arranges its services or expenses so as practically to exclude the poor from its communion and privileges, can never enjoy the divine blessing: it must speedily die of its own cold gentility.

I trust this church, which has been useful here in the past, may be still more so in the future. To

secure this, you need to select a pastor, not so much for his talents, as for his Christian character and fidelity. Character is the best of all things upon earth, and always tells the most in the long run. You must remember also that no pastor can benefit you or make this church useful, without your earnest co-operation and the diligent culture of your own hearts and character. Besides all this, there must be the vigorous exercise of discipline. In this respect, a solemn responsibility lies upon the Elders of the churches, not upon their pastors.

It is a settled principle that churches cannot maintain their purity and usefulness without discipline, wisely, kindly and vigorously administered—the same rules being applied to rich and poor with equal fidelity, and with equal promptitude. In all associations of men there are differences of opinion and of feeling, but in all, except in despotisms the will of the majority rules, and ought to rule. If a party in the state or a clique in the church are to govern, then there must be endless confusion and discord. In church affairs, Christian principle, forbearance, charity, and mutual love ought to rule. I earnestly urge, to pursue this course, and to labor together in harmony and love for the promotion of piety among yourselves, and of righteousness in the community—clinging to the faith and order of the gospel, and building upon the foundations already laid.

Many of you will never hear my voice again. Life is very short and uncertain. We shall all soon be in another world, with our destinies irrevocably fixed. If I should hereafter be permitted to visit this city, I shall miss some of you who now listen to me. We shall all meet again, but next time it will be at the judgment-seat of Christ, when the truthfulness of the Gospel which I have here preached will be realized by all. I shall carry with me grateful memories, a sincere respect and warm affection for

very many in this city. And with many of you I shall confidently hope to meet in that bright world where partings are unknown, where love rules every heart, and where the praises of Jesus are sung by every tongue. Until then, "I commend you to God and to the word of his grace, which is able to build you up and to give you an inheritance among all them which are sanctified." *Amen.*



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